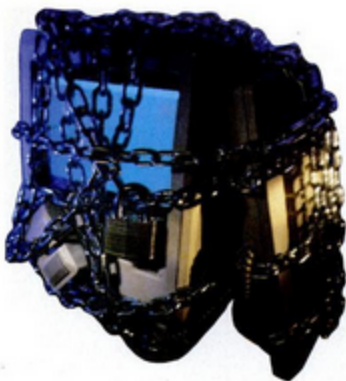




Photo by Peter



CYBER THRASH

Everyone thinks that they're nerds, but these teenage beer-guzzling hackers in their Megadeth t-shirts are the new heroes of the information age.

Eleven o'clock Saturday night, and I was headed for the DMZ again. I had a feeling the Big Kahuna would be there—and that he'd know what the hell was going on with the Cardboard Box. I sure didn't, and it was making me nervous.

On the TV set outside my dim Brooklyn bedroom, the Cold War was ending. Furious Czechs gathered in plazas, East Germans ogled West Berlin shop windows—great infotainment, if you like rubble. I was after a different story. No broken bricks, no raging crowds, just phantom signals playing hide-and-seek through a fiber-optic maze that slithered across the world. On the TV screen the present was crumbling into the past. On my computer screen a future was taking shape, and the Big Kahuna was somewhere inside it.

Amber glow brightened the room as I fired up my bargain-basement IBM clone and dialed into Telenet. The modem shrieked and crackled and

Article by Julian Dibbell

suddenly I was in, gliding down the Main Street of the world's computer networks. I typed in a series of numbers charging the call to a hulking defense contractor somewhere in the Midwest, then I entered the 12-digit network-user address that routed my connection across the Atlantic to a PC in France.

The cursor sat panting for a moment, then slid across the screen, spelling out the welcome logo: big block letters D, M, and Z. I entered a handle and dropped on in. It was the usual scene. A chat system capable of taking 25 callers at once, the DMZ was a hangout for hackers and phone phreaks from all over the world. A list of their handles glowed out at me from my monitor, silent and serene, but behind it a phreak/hack Casbah seethed. All those handles were passing private messages back and forth, cutting deals, trading the short-lived codes, passwords, and other fetishized bits of information that are the illegal tender of the hacker economy.

But I wasn't here to cop. I was here to find the Big Kahuna, and he was nowhere in sight. The list of handles glowed on, losing or adding a name now and then.

There was nothing to do but wait. In France! Wait in France for a kid who lived an area code away from me? Things had gotten weird so fast I'd barely noticed.

In the beginning it was all as simple as a headline: On October 4, 1989, Grumman Aerospace Corporation, a key supplier of combat aircraft to the Pentagon, sent police to arrest a 15-year-old boy for slipping into the Vax mainframe at Grumman's Long Island plant from his bedroom in Levittown, New York.

It wasn't much, just another hacker story in a year bursting with them. The biggest was on its way to court: Robert T. Morris Jr., who had loosed a worm into the defense department's national research network, unintentionally paralyzing over 6000 computers, faced five years and a \$250,000 fine. Earlier in the year a federal judge had sentenced 18-year-old Herbert Zinn Jr., aka "Shadow Hawk," to nine months in prison plus a \$10,000 fine and two and a half years' probation for sneaking into phone company systems and copying "highly sensitive" software. On the book-tour circuit, computer-security hero Clifford Stoll was out plugging *The Cuckoo's Egg*, his nonfiction account of KGB-backed West German hackers snooping for secrets in American networks.

Nineteen eighty-nine was shaping up into the year of the hacker, and I wanted a piece of it the way some people wanted a piece of the Berlin wall. I'd been getting more obsessed with computers every day since I bought my PC, and more fed up with writing record reviews. As things went, the Grumman bust was small potatoes, but by the conventions of the emerging media subgenre of the hacker story, it had the earmarks of a minor classic—crime, punishment, lads, teenage, suburbia. I wanted to write it.

Looking for dirt, I opened up the latest issue of 2600, "The Hacker Quarterly," a Long Island-based "zine." It was filled with how-to briefs, updates on worldwide hacker feats and busts, and a tough, political-minded defense of hacking and its constant companion, phone phreaking (the high-tech defrauding of Ma Bell). No mention of Grumman, though.

But hidden among all the other goodies was a list of computer bulletin boards (BBSs) loosely affiliated with the magazine. I switched on the PC, called one of the numbers—a Westchester exchange—and browsed a bit.

I'd been riding the tri-state boards for over a year, and at first I didn't see anything so different about this one. There was the usual pile of messages, friendly exchanges and occasional swipes, points of information and wisecracks. Subjects ranged from politics and music to personal-computer tech—with some notable additions, including general discussions of hacking and phreaking. But as the posted messages scrolled up my screen I could see that the tone here was unusual in the generally conservative world of BBSs. Talk was looser here, more anarchic, people used handles rather than real names and actually swore without fear of getting booted by the folks who ran the board, the sysops (systems operators). There was a muted festivity to the place, as if somewhere nearby, maybe in a back room no one would tell me about, one motherfucker of a party was going on.

But there was nothing on the Grumman bust, so I scrolled through the section devoted to hyping other BBSs. There were some well-pitched appeals for calls, but the ad that caught my eye only needed its Long Island area code to bait the hook:

**89Jul20 from the Wintertime @ YODDYNE
Call: The Cardboard Box. 516-742-0801**

My computer dialed the number, the modem connected, and then suddenly I was facing the heaviest dose of paranoia I'd ever encountered on a board. The BBS program asked for my handle (Dr. Bombay) and then slapped me with a questionnaire asking me to (a) declare that I was not an employee of any long-distance phone company or any local, state, or federal law enforcement agency, (b) identify a series of cryptic technical terms and acronyms, and (c) leave a note to the sysop, Wintertime, and his cosysops the X25 Warrior and the Big Kahuna, describing some of my hacking exploits. I passed the first part with flying colors, bullshitted my way miserably through the second, and confessed in the third that my greatest exploit was subscribing to 2600. So much for that board. After that performance they'd never let me in. I was back to square one.

A few days later I checked the board to see whether I'd been validated. I keyed through the log-in procedure and waited for the brush-off. It didn't come—I'd been granted full access. I was in.

I cut straight to the message base and worked my way down the menu. The e-mail section was unreadable, nothing but private messages. The PHREAKING section was full of phone company techno-lore and strange tales of making pay phones

do things they weren't designed to. In HACKING the messages listed phone numbers and passwords for all kinds of computers—university, corporate, NASA, PIRATES' LAIR was the "wares" section, a place to trade illegally copied commercial software. In CARDING there were messages on how to scam other people's credit card numbers and use them safely. The more I read, the wider my eyes bulged. Whoever these people were—the Signal Jockey, Dan Hackrotyd, Exile—they were hardcore.

I shook my amazement and headed for the HACKING NEWS/BUSTS section. A good idea: the second message that scrolled up brought the news of the Grumman bust to the board, and in the third Wintertime dropped the bomb that the unnamed minor in the papers, on TV, on the radio, was most likely A-TNT, until recently a regular at the Box. With this the conversation quickly heated up. How could they be sure it was him? Would he narc? Would they bust the board? As the days and messages scrolled by, though, it became clear that the board was safe, and the questions grew more philosophical. For instance: was A-TNT, or was he not, a lamer?

Lameness, it seemed, was the ultimate sin around here, and not everybody was sure A-TNT was guilty.

"He wasn't such a bad guy. He was just getting started," wrote the Mechanic. **"It's too bad."**

"People get busted because they get lazy," Mirage suggested.

But the Watchman wasn't going for it: **"Lazy... lame... I don't see much difference. If you make a mistake you're lame. So we're all lame to an extent... but, whether you're the elTetSt hacker or the louillest k00x d00d, it takes a BIG fuck-up to get busted."**

Whatever A-TNT was, though, he sure wasn't the whiz kid the media was calling him. **"Shit, he was asking ME for help,"** cracked the Mechanic, **"so you KNOW he wasn't no genius."** But what else was new? The media got it wrong again. Pretty soon the little lamer would be on "Gerald," repenting of his evil ways, frightening the old folks with tales of sneaker-worshipping skinhead hacker cults.

"Why is it when you see a computer user on TV it is always some total fucking modern-GEEK?" asked the Watchman, clearly pissed-off. **"Why don't they ever show computer users like us, chugging Buds and dragging on Marlboro 100s in our Megadeth t-shirts and hacking k00l shit?"**

I was starting to wonder myself. The moment I dropped in here I knew I had found that back-room party at last. These people were having the time of their adolescent lives, and they were doing it with enough style and attitude to qualify for full-fledged MTV-sanctioned youth subculture status. All right, so maybe A-TNT wasn't a lamer, but who wanted to read another morality play about a computer delinquent scared straight by a brush with the law? The real story was still on the loose, and I was staring right at it.

The only problem was that a mountain of hacker paranoia was standing between me and the story. There are good reasons trust is such a hard-won and fragile commodity down in the computer underground. Since the breezy "War Games" days of the early 80s, the federal and state governments have criminalized the shit out of hacking—by last year every state but pinko Vermont had passed laws against computer trespassing and "theft" and the



federal Computer Fraud and Abuse Act of 1986 had made hacking punishable by anywhere from one year to 20.

After a brief period of relative impunity, hackers were beginning to go to jail. That kind of atmosphere tightens definitions of common sense. On boards around the country, the elite hacker group Legion of Doom was circulating a novice's guide that warned against leaving your real phone number on any BBS ("no matter how k-rad it seems") or sharing real-life information with any one you didn't know too well.

"Don't be afraid to be paranoid," the guide concluded. "Remember, you *are* breaking the law. It doesn't hurt to store everything encrypted on your hard disk, or keep your notes buried in the backyard or in the trunk of your car. You may feel a little funny, but you'll feel a lot funnier when you meet Bruno, your transvestite cellmate who axed his family to death."

Still, I got the feeling that even if the dangers didn't exist at all hackers would have to invent some. The main thrill of the hack may indeed be, as the LOD intro insists, "the pursuit and capture of knowledge," but paranoia is at least part of the kick. As the pop culture industry is quick to recognize (see horror-writer Chet Day's new book *The Hacker* for a deliciously schlocky tale of an elite hacker board infiltrated not by the feds but by a terrorizing demon

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hacker cults.**

handled "The Succubus"), the technology just lends itself to cloak-and-dagger drama.

So it wouldn't do for me to start asking pesky-reporter questions. If I spooked the phreak/hackers who populated the place they might scatter, leaving me with the blood of a dead BBS on my hands. I decided to approach the sysops instead. On my computer I carefully composed a text file suggesting we meet and explaining my intentions and my sympathy towards hackers. Then I called the Box, uploaded the text to Wintermute in the private file-transfer section, logged off, and crossed my fingers.

I called back the next day, adrenalin rushing as soon as I saw that I had private mail from the sysops. But it was only a message acknowledging that they'd received the file. I called back again the following day. No answer. I called later in the week. Still nothing.

My nerves were frizzling, but at least the waiting gave me time to browse the message bases and get a better picture of the board. Slowly I began to figure out what any seasoned member of the computer underground would have sensed at first glance: the Cardboard Box was not to be confused with a pirate board. This was a hack/phreak board, dedicated primarily to the mutual education of its members in the arts of second-story telecommunications. According to Northern Illinois University

criminologist Gordon Meyer (I downloaded his master's thesis from the Box's database), there are roughly a hundred such boards in existence, varying widely in quality (the wares boards, where uploading and downloading pirated software is the main activity, outnumber the h/p's by about 20 to one).

I also got to know the players. There was the Fone Ranger who called in regularly from Chicago to rant about the lameness of "warez dOoDz." There were one or two other out-of-staters, and occasionally someone would drop in from England or Switzerland. The rest of the 20 or so regulars were spread out between deep Long Island and far Manhattan—not a huge area, but diverse. When Exile, an inner-city caller of color, referred to A-TNT with the generic "nigga," he got back a clueless explanation from the "burban Big Kahuna to the effect that the kid didn't appear to be black in any of the pictures he'd seen. In the obligatory MUSIC section, similar culture clashes flared and fizzled—the Mechanic, calling from the heart of the Boogie-Down Bronx, went toe-to-toe with the metalheads and prog-rockers for a while in fuck-you defenses of hip hop, house, and reggae. Then he gave up in a confession of secret love for Genesis and Phil Collins.

I was learning all kinds of things. Except why the sysops weren't responding to my letter. A week had passed since I uploaded it. I called again, planning to leave another anxious, nifty message. Instead, there it was. Contact:

**FROM: WINTERMUTE
TO: DR. BOMBAY
SUBJECT: ARTICLE...
A REPLY TO #204**

UHM... Well... OK I might be able to manage me X25 Warrior and Big Kahuna meeting you (sorry we cant give out addresses or phone #s)... I have a few conditions... dont put any real handles or board names... also... I would appreciate it if you would say clearly that hackers dont destroy anything on a system, they just want to learn how to use it... also... A contribution to the BBS for a 38,000 BAUD modem would be appreciated!

I didn't kick my heels because there wasn't room under my desk. I just sent Wintermute a message saying I didn't think SPIN would cough up modem money but the other conditions would be no problem.

After all, why not help clean up the hackers' public image? It was sad but true enough that the "threat" of computer viruses has obsessed the media, which had in general been too lazy to find out that in the hack/phreak community planting a destructive virus was something you might do to a rival bulletin board but never to a hacked system. And why wouldn't the media call bullshit on corporate claims of huge losses to the computer underground? The software industries were claiming they lost billions of dollars a year to piracy. The phone companies claimed a million a day bled to phreaking. No one ever pointed out that they were talking about "theft" of goods that didn't disappear from the shelves when stolen and would not have been used anyway if they had to be paid for. Information technology had a tendency to make us

information peddlers—journalists like me—look stupid, and it was hardly fair that hackers suffered for our lameness.

So sure, I would gladly do what I could to make amends. I told Wintermute—as long as we could meet and talk. "Just give me a time and place," I said.

Another long week passed. Finally I got this message:

**FROM: WINTERMUTE
TO: DR. BOMBAY
SUBJECT: ARTICLE...
A REPLY TO #339**

I am having problems... Nobody wants to meet you, they think you are gonna appear with a dozen cops or something...

For Christ's sake, I sighed and typed out a reply:

**FROM: DR. BOMBAY
TO: WINTERMUTE
SUBJECT: ARTICLE...
A REPLY TO #339**

What would it take to convince you I'm not a narc? What do you want? My American Express card number so you guys can fuck my life up if I double cross you? I don't know. This is a little depressing. I mean, I only have about half a story if I can't meet with anybody. What would it take?

The next day's e-mail brought this:

**FROM: WINTERMUTE
TO: DR. BOMBAY
SUBJECT: ARTICLE...
A REPLY TO #348**

Well... If we wanted your AMEX # we would have it already... As soon as I talk to Kahuna we will call you and see what happens...

The bravado was gangster-movie perfect. I had to laugh.

But nobody called. After a couple days I logged onto the Box again and got a message from Big Kahuna asking for my social security number. I thought about it: I'd already given them my real name and real phone number. What more could they do with the SS#? I typed it in. Then I downloaded some bedtime reading from the board's library of text files and logged off.

I could have picked better bedtime reading. The file I'd leeches turned out to contain two brief Newsweek articles by a reporter named Richard Sandza. The first recounted his undercover adventures as "Montana Wildhack" on hack/phreak boards around the country. The second described the hacker response to the first story after it appeared: Sandza was vilified throughout the hacker world, inundated with crank calls, and found his credit history fucked with and his card numbers posted all over the BBS nation. Not a soothing tale. I managed to convince myself that the reason he had caught so much hell was that he had used real board names and handles. Even so, there was no telling what might piss off some small group of hackers

somewhere and set me up for the same bitch of a time. I went to sleep sorry I'd given up my social security number.

Four days later I called the board. E-mail: the Big Kahuna had discovered my address. Big deal. They already had my name and phone number; they could have gotten the address out of the phone book. I dashed off a quick dis and moved on to the next letter waiting for me. It went a little something like this:

FROM: WINTERMUTE
TO: DR. BOMBAY
SUBJECT: CHECK THIS SHIT OUT

Y365 - PROCEED
NM-DIBBEL JULIAN.

*DIBBEL JULIAN SINCE 11/15/88
*FAD 11/18/89 FN-302 TAPE APTD 11/88
*SUM-08/188-10/189, PRIOR-NO, FB-NO,
ACCTS-2, HC-90-470, 2-ONES.
*BUSID CODE APTD OPND HIC TAMS BAL
PID RT 30160/90 MR DLARACOUNT NO
01 1*9060N259 10/189 08/188 470 470 01 00
00 00 01 3719355233500
02 1*9060N259 09/189 10/188 0 0 01 00 00
00 10 3712389469900
END OF REPORT

My mouth flapped open. It was brief and pathetic, but it was my credit history, and my American Express card numbers gleamed in its midst like a pair of hot rhinestones. This should only have intensified my fears of a few nights earlier, but all I felt was a mixture of astonishment and admiration.

My hands groped to the keyboard to enter a reply. I didn't know what to say. Suddenly the cursor jumped out of my control and started spelling:

Hey doc, it said.

In a bedroom or a basement somewhere in the 516 area, Wintermute had broken into chat mode. I typed back:

—Hi. That is no impressive stuff.
—Hey. It is no big shit... dont worry I wont post your card #s all over the place...

We got to talking.

—Uh, u mind my asking how old u are?
—Why u wanna know?
—Just being a reporter
—Well... should I make the story dramatic and say I am 11 or should I tell you my real age?
—The truth would be fine
—Oh, well... I just turned 15 in September

Fifteen. Jesus.

—How bout the other sysops?
—Well X25 Warrior is 14 and Big Kahuna is 16-17 (I really dont know)
—u guys ever meet in person?
—Yeah... me and the Warrior hang out all the time. As for Kahuna, we've never met
—U never met him and you let him run the board with you? how can you trust him?

—I trust him more than I trust you, I can tell you that...

But he kept talking. He told me hacking was fun and I should try it. He gave me the numbers of some hacked-out systems to call. This all took a long time. The cursor crawled across and down the screen like a maddeningly slo-mo game of Centipede. Two hours later my eyes were bloodshot rheumy puddles from staring at the monitor and the conversation was ending on a sour note. My questions had gotten too personal and Wintermute suddenly wanted every detail worth printing off the record. As we said goodbye and signed off I thought it might be the last time I heard from him. I could see the whole story disappearing back into the electronic depths it had emerged from.

I turned off the computer and shuffled out of my bedroom in a daze. On the TV in the kitchen Ted Koppel was announcing the fall of the Berlin Wall. Right now it was history, but in a few weeks big time AT&T, every phreak/hacker's favorite long distance company, would be using this same footage in ads, as if it had been some basic human urge to telecommunicate that had smashed the wall. They weren't entirely wrong. People were fighting for a number of things in Eastern Europe, but would anyone deny that the free circulation of news, stock market prices and music videos were high on the list?

On the TV in the kitchen the nuclear age was completing its transition to the information age. War, peace, commerce, fun—none of these would be the same anymore. It was still possible of course that the new age would turn out to be just a digital remastering of the old one. We would measure the new stockpiles in megabytes rather than megatons, but they'd be stockpiles nonetheless—endless lists of data, names and numbers and the power that goes with them. Still, as long as three teenagers on a telecomm joyride could pick the corporate lock on those lists, there was a chance things might be different this time around. I might never speak to Wintermute again. But it was reassuring to know he was out there.

Wintermute didn't disappear. In a few days he and the Big Kahuna and the X25 Warrior started conference-calling my apartment. I was never home when they called—I'd get in and find a series of extended messages on my machine, three high-keyed adolescent boy voices cracking jokes, chattering among themselves, laughing uncontrollably and making rude comments on my taste in outgoing-message music. It was like the Beastie Boys had taken over my answering machine.

Finally they left a number I could call and leave a voice-message at. They had pirated a voice mailbox. VMBs are those automated answering-machine systems you get nowadays when you call big firms, and it turns out they are eminently hackable: find an unused box in the system, hack out its password, and it's yours (most phreak/hackers use them as safe places to trade phone codes)—until somebody at the office discovers your coup and kills the box.

The boys' VMB was still good. I left a time they could definitely get hold of me. They called back. We talked for two hours. I was full of questions:

Like, what was the point? What did you do once you got inside a forbidden computer?

Well first of all you didn't destroy anything. That was rule number one. But that left a lot of room. You could take a look at some pretty interesting things (the boys claimed that on a NASA computer once they found a report about a fatal crash that never made it to the press). You could also use some systems as gateways to networks brimming with other computers. You could even set up a hidden, parasite BBS. The mechanic, they told me, was in the process of doing just that on a Vax he'd hacked down in New Jersey. But all these things merely iced the cake. The big challenge was getting in. "Once you're in," said the Kahuna, "it's like, 'Ho-hum. That was fun. What now?'"

And what were the easiest systems and networks to hack into?

Well, Arpanet, the defense department's research network, was certainly one of them. Then there were the credit report companies—CBI, TRW. There were three good ways to get passwords for their computers. One was to go "trashing," poking around in the garbage of a credit-database client to see what carelessly discarded printouts might reveal. Another was "social engineering"—calling up database-users and putting on your best grown-up voice to bullshit a password out of them. If neither of these suited your style, you could always just trade for the passwords with whatever cool shit you might



have—a pile of codes, some VMBs.

And what about the stereotypes of hackers? Were they math prodigies?

No, not really. The Kahuna sucked at math in fact, did much better in English. And none of the three knew much about programming. Knowing how to program would help, of course, and the most elite hackers knew at least one programming language, but it wasn't necessary—hacking wasn't a system of rules, it was a craft.

Well, were they loners then? Troubled kids? Loners, no—they all had plenty of friends, Kahuna went to parties on the weekends, played a lot of pick-up football. But troubled? Well, they were teenagers. "All my friends are troubled," said the Warrior, "and most of them don't know anything about computers."

The boys were sharp. They were funny and in a gruff teen-boy way they were friendly too. I liked them and I looked forward to their phone calls, which began coming fairly regularly after the first contact. I remained uneasy though. Every time I pushed for a face-to-face meeting, they would

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cagily put me off. My deadline loomed and I still hadn't clinched the story.

It never even occurred to me that they might know the story better than I did, but they did, and they'd been feeding it to me in little doses all along, a code here, a password there. The sly little bastards were trying to show me how easy it was to get hooked on hacking, and they were doing a pretty good job. The rush I got when I first called the DMZ (called fucking France! and didn't pay a penny!) kept me coming back for more. And when I slipped into the Mechanic's Jersey Vax, my first actual illegal entry, I suddenly had a glimpse of what it was all about. These were low-grade borrowed buzzes, sub-warez do0d activity, but they were heady enough that I finally understood Wintermute's uncharacteristically rapturous declarations that he would never give up hacking as long as he lived.

But I still had to meet the boys.

Then one week they didn't call. Caught up in other assignments, I didn't have time to drop by the Box, but the silence was making me jittery. I was jonesing for the underground. It couldn't hurt, I decided at the end of the week, to give the board a quick call and see what was up. I switched on the computer and dialed up the Cardboard Box. There was no answer. That wasn't good. If the hard disk on Wintermute's computer had failed, it could be hours before he got the board back up. When I called later that night the board was still down. Fuck! Well, it would be back up the next day.

But the next day there was still no answer from the Cardboard Box. I was really uptight now. The boys' VMB had died and I still didn't know any of their home phone numbers. The story was disappearing again. There was only one way left to get in touch with them. It was a long shot, but fuck it, at least it would give me some kind of hacker-world fix.

So there I was, eleven o'clock Saturday night, back in the DMZ again. I'd bumped into the Big Kahuna there a couple times before. Maybe he'd be there tonight. The list of handles was long, but no Big Kahuna. There was nothing to do but wait.

Which wasn't so bad. The DMZ was a fun place to hang out. You just sat there and people sent you messages. Occasionally you got a racy one from one of the gay French locals who seemed to be drawn to the DMZ by its high teenage testosterone count. No doubt their presence flustered the hackers, who in general liked a gag joke as much as the next American

adolescent, but the hackers' own approaches didn't seem a lot less prurient sometimes. "Got any codes?" was the standard opening line. It could spark a nice conversation, but as often as not it led straight to a quick and dirty exchange of digits.

There was a lot of codes-cruising going on that night. I was having a hard time keeping up since I didn't have any to offer. Finally I decided to just go ahead and identify myself as a reporter and see what happened. The results were good: within 10 minutes I was carrying on two full-blown conversations at the same time. One was with Gestapo, a 16-year-old New Age anarchist Dokken fan from Phoenix. The other was with a guy whose handle identified him as the sysop of the DMZ, said he was a 28-year-old French-based U.S. Air Force lieutenant colonel who'd been running the system out of his home for two years.

Identity here was even more fluid than on regular boards, since you could log on with any handle you felt like, and even change your handle as often as you cared to within a single session. I was logged on as "Scrumpt" at the moment. Last session I was "Scratch." Before that I was "Richard Marx."

Scrumpt was getting sleepy. I was sending farewell messages to Gestapo and the sysop when a message came through from someone tagged Internet, and plainly identified as calling from the USA:

Heil-o.

Hi, I typed. Where u calling from?

The USA, came the reply.

Great. More paranoia. Well, this would take care of Internet: UH huh. Well, dont mind the questions. It's my job. I'm a reporter for SPIN magazine.

The reply took a little while to get back to me:

—Dr Bombay?

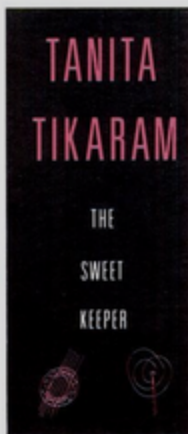
—Big Kahuna????

—OH... No this is Wintermute. Hi.

—OH Hi, man. Sorry I've been out of touch for so long...

—Well, its no problem. But you missed it...big shit at the Signal Jack's house with Grumman security...

The news was bad. Sort of. Grumman security had traced the Signal Jockey and a number of other local hackers trying to log onto the same Grumman Vax that had been A-TNT's undoing. And now they were making house calls in the company of Nassau County police officers and an unidentified guy



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with "fed" written all over him. They didn't have a lot on the Signal Jockey so it didn't look like they were going to press charges, but the story didn't end there. The jock's mom knew the Big Kahuna's mom and told her about the visit. After that it didn't take long for Mr. and Mrs. Kahuna to figure out why their son had been spending so much time with his computer, and boy were they pissed. They took his modem away and grounded him for a year.

It got worse. One of the kids Grumman had swooped down on was coysop for Quiet Riot, a band in the neighboring 718 area. Right away the other sysops pulled the BBS down, and Wintermute, scared shitless Grumman would be coming for him next, took the hint. He wiped all the BBS files off his hard disc and retired the board indefinitely.

The Cardboard Box was dead.

In the week that followed Bush met Gorbachev at Malta, and the boys agreed to meet me in Manhattan. It was a strange and beautiful world. The military-industrial complex had succeeded in killing the Cardboard Box, but there was suddenly a good chance it wouldn't survive the century itself. The postwar national security state was scrambling to find a new rationale for its undercover

shenanigans, but hackers were already living in a world in which covert action was nothing more than a game children played. The future was rushing towards us faster than the past could get out of the way.

Appropriately enough, the boys and I agreed to rendezvous in front of a science-fiction bookstore we all knew. The Kahuna wouldn't make it of course. He was still under house arrest.

There was some doubt about how we'd recognize each other, but when the time came I spotted them before I'd gotten within two blocks of the bookstore: two sweet-faced, slightly chubby generic white teens, working hard at looking inconspicuous. One of them looked like he had a couple of growth spurts to go. Both of them had their hands deep in the pockets of clothes that looked like last year's Christmas presents. I sidled up and muttered, "Got any codes?" The boys laughed, and we all tried to quickly get over the weirdness of having faces stuck to our names. The short one was the X25 Warrior, the taller blond kid was Wintermute.

I took them to lunch. The Warrior got a cheeseburger; Wintermute ordered ribs and insisted on Pepsi over Coke. They cracked jokes with the waitress, awkward and wise-assed at the same time. We talked about how they

got into hacking, about the superiority of their k-rad Amigas to my boring IBM, about the Big Kahuna's bad luck. We talked about the Cardboard Box. Neither of them seemed too sorry it was down. It had been going for over a year, a ripe old age for a hack/pneak board. And with the modem freed up Wintermute could do more of his own hacking now, spend hours scanning out entire 800-number exchanges, shit like that.

After lunch we walked around. We looked in computer-store windows. We dropped by a magazine shop that sold 2600. I bought two copies for some friends, the Warrior bought one for himself, and Wintermute shoplifted another.

It was getting late, I'd have to head home soon. "OK," said Wintermute, "but first you have to do something for us."

"Whatever," I said. "Well, OK. Well we'll give you the money, but um..." his feet shuffled nervously—"OK, can you buy us a copy of Playboy? The one with Kimberly Conrad on the cover?" The Warrior giggled.

We went to three different newsstands looking for that issue, but none of them had it yet. Finally the boys decided they would settle for a quart of Foster's. I'd never bought alcohol for the underaged before, and

certainly never dreamed the first minors I did it for would be capable of altering my credit history, but I didn't blink. They waited outside the store while I made the buy.

When I came out we opened the can right there on the street and headed for the subway swigging. We were all grinning like idiots.

At the subway entrance I turned and said goodbye, and the boys walked off. They were going to catch a movie maybe, they didn't know. I watched as they made their way past a nearby newsstand. No Kimberly Conrad, but lots of headlines that supposedly added up to the end of history.

From where I stood it looked like the beginning. New struggles were brewing. Information capital was accumulating like crazy, and the gap between the info-haves and the info-have-nots was gaping wider all the time. Sooner or later it would come down to a fight, and whether they knew it or not, kids like the Big Kahuna, the X25 Warrior and Wintermute were among the first people to be on the right side.

I saw Wintermute take one last gulp of beer. Then the boys disappeared into the city crowds.

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